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Astronomy and Witch Craze

By Daniel Bamberger

Descendant of the Battenberg Bode family became a renowned astronomer in the 18th century

Battenberg – The Bode family has been traceable in Battenberg since the 16th century, when Hans Bode (c. 1545–1610) likely came to the town from the Wittgenstein region. But the descendants of Hans Bode have also left their mark on history beyond Battenberg. An 18th-century astronomer from the family discovered the galaxy now known as Bode's Galaxy and played a role in naming the planet Uranus. The family's history also offers a glimpse into the persecution of alleged witches in the early modern period.

Daniel Bamberger from Laisa has thoroughly researched the history of the Battenberg Bode family and shared his findings with our newspaper.

The most well-known member of the family is likely Johann Elert Bode (1747–1826), who worked as a mathematician and astronomer in Berlin, despite an eye disease that left him blind in his right eye. In 1774, he was appointed to the University of Berlin, where he gained wide recognition as a professor, Royal Prussian Astronomer, director of the observatory, and editor of prominent scientific journals.



Worked as an astronomer in Berlin: A drawing from 1806 shows Johann Elert Bode.

Several astronomical discoveries still bear his name today. In 1772, he published the Titius-Bode Law, a formula for calculating the distances of the planets from the sun. In 1781, he discovered the galaxy now known as Bode's Galaxy (Messier 81) in the constellation Ursa Major. The lunar crater Bode and the asteroid (998) Bodea were also named in his honor. Most significantly, however, he influenced the naming of the planet Uranus, discovered in 1781. The name was his proposal.

Johann Elert Bode was born and raised in Hamburg. His great-grandfather was Johannes Bode (1638–c. 1695) from Battenberg, who, together with his wife Anna Sebilla, moved to Münden (now part of Lichtenfels), where he served as a pastor. His grandfather, Johann Christian Bode (1677–1742), moved from Münden to Hamburg, where he worked as a tailor. His son, Johann Elert's father Johann Jakob Bode (1719–1799), ran a merchant school in Hamburg and married a citizen's daughter in 1746.

Johann Hermann Bode (1661–1729), who lived in Battenberg, appears only occasionally in the town's records aside from his official roles as councilman, mayor, and churchwarden. What stands out, however, are several disputes that originated in

his house, even though he himself was not directly involved. For instance, in 1715, Curt Sieboth threw a beer mug at Jost Wahl's head during an argument. Due to poverty, he served a day and a night in prison instead of paying a fine. In 1719, town councilors Conrad Sieboth and Martin Schmidt engaged in a physical and verbal fight.

A noteworthy entry concerning Johann Hermann Bode appears in 1698. It refers to a dispute between Bode and Alexander Limbach on their way home from a public witch burning in Hallenberg, as the record notes. According to the Battenberg administrative accounts of 1698, Hermann Bode was fined one gulden for addressing Limbach in an improper manner. Particularly intriguing is the casual mention of the witch burning. Such executions were public spectacles at the time, drawing large crowds. They were rarely questioned on moral grounds.

No case of a death sentence for witchcraft is recorded in Battenberg itself. The only known witch trial in the town occurred in 1590, against Margaretha, wife of Andreas Strieder. She was accused of having picked up and brought home three handfuls of pebbles on June 20, 1589, just before a hailstorm. During interrogation, several elderly citizens testified that even Margaretha's great-grandmother had long been "strongly suspected" of practicing witchcraft. Margaretha was acquitted.

Why Battenberg was largely spared from the witch craze remains unclear. Compared to several neighboring towns, the absence of additional trials is striking. In his 2011 essay "Rehabilitation of the Victims of the Witch Craze in Hallenberg", city chronicler Georg Glade wrote that at least 43 people lost their lives in Hallenberg for alleged witchcraft between 1598 and 1696. Given the gaps in records, it's likely the real number was higher. According to Glade, the last known witch trial in Hallenberg occurred in 1699 and ended in acquittal. Bode and Limbach in 1698 witnessed one of the last witch burnings in Hallenberg.

Shortly thereafter, belief in witchcraft began to wane, and the dark chapter, which claimed thousands of lives across the German-speaking world, came to an end. To illustrate this shift, consider an incident from 1712: that year, Johannes Scheu (also: Shaw), an Irishman who had become a citizen of Battenberg earlier that year, was fined two gulden for calling Curt Sieboth's wife a witch and sorceress. The way such accusations were handled had changed significantly.